Bensmaïa, Réda. *Experimental Nations. Or, the Invention of the Maghreb.* Translated by Alyson Waters. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003 (pp 232). $ 19.95 paper. ISBN 0-691-08937-X.

Réda Bensmaïa's *Experimental Nations* emerges in the context of recent developments in the humanities and is to be read in relation to questions such as the so-called end of theory and the abundant obituary-like accounts of its accomplishments, deadends and consecutive politicizations (Eagleton, Leitch); the reemergence of the concept of world literature (Damrosch, Casanova); the frequent use of ideas stemming from Deleuze and Guattari's concept of territorialization; the outbreak of the relevant notion of planetarity (Chee-Dimock); the prevalence of area studies and the ensuing reconsideration of the more traditional divisions within literary studies, mainly the segregation among national literatures (Spivak); theoretical activity as it is developed beyond Paris and its major Anglo-Saxon venues; finally, the broader postcolonial and anti-Eurocentric paradigm privileging non Western, alternative readings and often underestimating or even disregarding their possible affinities with former ways of thinking about similar matters.

In this vein, Bensmaïa puts emphasis on the fact that Francophone Maghrebi literature has often been seen as an eccentric form of writing breaking with Parisian culture, as a linguistic self-mutilation undertaking the risk of canceling out the process of decolonization, and as a futile text production lacking a proper public which to address. Therefore, Maghrebi literature is an exemplary case of a corpus studied not in terms of its ideological potential, but on the basis of an obvious political agenda. Bensmaïa's project goes beyond issues such as the reclaiming of an idiom by postcolonial literature and the reduction of identities to geographical boundaries; he opts for "horizontal," thus transcendental, experimental nations which are "above all nations that writers have had to imagine or explore as if they were territories to rediscover and stake out" (8). Such virtual - non-actual, yet not unreal - nations undermine the very possibility of belonging to any *one* nation.

In his first chapter ("Nations of Writers"), Bensmaïa shows that what has been at stake with the study of Maghrebi literature is the production of a cultural terrain and the invention through popular memory of an "authentic" site which would not be infected by colonization. While engaging with this, Maghrebi literature finds its way through "vernacular," "vehicular," "referential" and "mythic" language. It intersects with French and Arabic discourses and mingles with the native perspective of precolonial Algeria as well as the *pensée mythante* that lays the foundations of a nation to come. This

complex multilingualism forms the basis of a nonconforming geolinguistics and of a writers' Rubicon on their way to the formation of a nation.

In the second chapter ("Cities of Writers"), Bensmaïa describes Medina in mostly deCerteauian terms: the *espace propre*, the synchronic time of the city, the concept-city as a universal and anonymous subject making a *dépays* out of Medina and a *flâneur* or land surveyor out of the Medinant. He also mentions Algiers and Paris as sites of memory in Allouache's film *Salut Cousin*, and he extensively refers to Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of minoritarian becoming, which parallels the idea of belonging to a nation which is itself in becoming and so explains the sense in which the two cities turned out to be centers of both French and Algerian memory. In the third chapter ("Nabile Farès, or How to Become Minoritarian"), Bensmaïa discusses Farès's work and raises the issue of paganism as artistic living and as prehistory leading to cosmic history, as well as the Barthesian idea of a preexisting fascist language reducing multiplicities and that of the rhizomatic book as establishing blocks of alliances; in this way, he remains consistent with his previous remarks and conceptualizes Algeria in terms that open it up to various interconnections with nations distant in space and time.

In his discussion of Djaout's *L'Invention du desert* ("Postcolonial Nations"), Bensmaïa criticizes Jameson's all-encompassing thesis that "all third-world texts are necessarily ... allegorical ... particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel" (68), and stigmatizes the absence of any substantial reference to the languages involved. Nevertheless, this does not prevent Djaout's text from being seen, in an overtly Jamesonian way, as the product of a libidinal investment to be read in social terms, or Djaout himself from being grouped with Third-World intellectuals as by definition political intellectuals.

In the following chapters ("(Hi)stories of Expatriation," "Multilingualism and National 'Traits,'" and "The Cartography of the Nation"), Bensmaïa discusses Djebar's film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, Khatibi's *Amour Bilingue* and Feraoun's *Le Fils du pauvre*. He talks about the geothetic function of rhetorical commonplaces that leads to a topography of feminine places and a chronotope of feminine time. Reading Khatibi is seen as a major breakthrough in the attempt to escape from the prison house of colonial language, mainly because translation consists of languages meeting without merging; the consequent bilingualism, following the Nietzschean premise, splits Maghrebi history into a before and an after this encounter. Therefore, the postcolonial space of writing is no longer "dominated by a Manichean vision of language and ... identity" (104). Hence, too, French no

longer confines itself to expressing a unified mind, it becomes "untrustworthy," it hears the Arabic in the between-two-languages, it is "cast out" or "whited out" and it becomes a calligraphy giving birth to a *pensée autre*. For this reason, the writer no longer belongs to a single country, but experiences a virtual space which transforms him or her into a "professional traveler" for whom "literary nationalities" no longer apply. A preeminent hospitality of languages is established, thanks to which "the relation is more important than the opposed terms" (132) evoking notions such as Barthes' "neutral" and Serres' "third-instructed."

To sum up, Bensmaïa's *Experimental Nations* questions a particular way of seeing the relation between Western thought and postcolonial literature, i.e. the fantasy of being contaminated by a supposedly homogeneous and transparent "colonial" ideology. The main conclusion seems to be that the various protocols of knowledge used in Maghrebi cultural production are not reducible to a single hegemonic formation. However, reclaiming the need to be sensitive to the concrete reality of the texts under critical examination is either stating the obvious or omitting valuable theoretical precedent: recourse to history does not necessarily spring from depreciation of and alienation from non Western cultures, and it often leads to rethinking history itself.

Bensmaïa's overall project remains incomplete in that it offers no concrete illustration of the very idea of an experimental nation. Nevertheless, this book can be seen as a solid preview of these nations: it highlights several instances where the invention of the Maghreb converges with contemporary theory and it implicitly suggests that other postcolonial literatures are to be seen in the same way. Several newly forged nations could almost effortlessly come together in one by way of theorizing their becoming; in other words, launching theory as a meeting point, Bensmaïa proffers his corpus to an audacious cross-national reading.

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